

# Contemporary adult education philosophies and practices in art galleries and museums in Canada and the UK

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## Abstract

*Public art galleries and museums have been mandated to become more relevant and useful to the lived experiences of the broad communities they claim to serve. Adult education has long been part of the work of these institutions, although historically the relationship has been uneasy, and they seldom feature in the adult education literature. To fill this knowledge gap, we developed a cross-national comparative study that employed individual interviews, focus groups and observations to explore the adult education perspectives and activities of adult educators in art galleries and museums in Canada, England and Scotland. Findings show inconsistencies in understandings around education and learning, disconnections between internal and external activities and lack of institutional support. However, a plethora of socially responsive activities to tackle racial and religious intolerance, or explore power and identity, illustrate that despite tradition and other constraints, these adult educators are making valuable contributions to social justice and change.*

## Introduction

Public art galleries and museums are ubiquitous features of the cultural landscape in Europe, North America and much of the world (Alexander and Alexander, 2008). Conceived in elitist provenance, they have been charged with everything from social exclusion to sanitising history, from legitimising what counts as knowledge and has cultural and aesthetic value to reinforcing existing power structures (e.g. Janes, 2009; Hooper-Greenhill, 2001; Mayo, 2012; O'Neill, 2011). Yet there are scholars and practitioners who argue that a paradigmatic change is afoot. These institutions are now mandated to become more relevant to the experiences of the communities they serve and to play a more active educational role in addressing our social and environmental problems

(Janes, 2009, p.166; see also Taylor & Parrish, 2010).

Adult education has been part of the mandate of public art galleries and museums since their inception, although the relationship has been uneasy and the practice ill-defined (e.g. Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011). Equally problematic, the importance of art galleries and museums to adult education is rarely considered (Mayo, 2012). But Taylor and Parrish (2010, p.5) remind us that these institutions are ‘complex sites of adult learning and teaching’ with tremendous and often untapped potential to promote community engagement and social change.

This paper will discuss findings from a cross-national comparative study of adult education perspectives and practices in museums and galleries in Canada, England and Scotland. Our study identifies major differences in how gallery and museum education is perceived, as well as a general sense of marginalisation from the wider institution. It also uncovers a plethora of critical aesthetic educational responses to pressing social problems and several interesting approaches to critical social engagement.

### **Literature Review**

Some of today’s most pressing social issues include racism, homophobia and other social and religious intolerances. Recent decades have seen increases in socio-economic inequality, environmental deterioration, violence and social isolation. The primary aim of adult education is to provide opportunities to acquire the skills and knowledge to navigate effectively and purposefully in the world (English & Mayo, 2012). Wilson (2010, p.4) refers to this as gaining knowledge power, or the capacity to think critically and ‘tackle the most difficult problems.’ Public arts and cultural institutions are increasingly under pressure both from governments and internally to rekindle their social mission as a way of remaining relevant and economically viable (O’Neill, 2011). These aesthetic sites now utilise their resources and institutional spaces to facilitate various social agendas such as neighbourhood renewal, social cohesion, citizenship, deliberative democracy and social change (Crooke, 2007; Taylor & Parrish, 2010). While many museums and galleries are embracing this paradigm shift, concerns have been raised around their capacity to deliver on these new demands (e.g. Janes, 2009).

Historically, museums and galleries have often taken an elitist and exclusionary approach to the collection and representation of material culture (e.g. Borg &

Mayo, 2010). Far from engaging with the everyday stories, artefacts and challenges of the world, they have persisted as ‘traditional sites where knowledge and truth are displayed by the socially powerful and consumed by the powerless’ (Golding, 2005, p.51). In 1956 Bigman found the ‘museum-going group consisted largely of professionals, white-collar workers and students with very few workers’ (p.28). Little has changed, and many museum and gallery educators remain oriented towards an elite who they believe prefer more traditional pedagogical practice (Borg & Mayo, 2010; Author, 2010; Golding, 2005). Further, although education departments were formalized in the 1970s, their place within the institution has been complex and often, marginal (Chobot & Chobot, 1990; Hooper-Greenfield, 2004). Perhaps as consequence, most museums still make little provision for adult education, as Anderson, Gray and Chadwick found in their 2003 large-scale quantitative study of Europe. Historically, the role of the educator was ill defined, leading Burnham & Kai-Kee (2011) to refer to the work as ‘without design...the result not of conscious long-term planning or theory, but of ad hoc, step-by-step responses to public demand’ (p.25). Anderson et al (2003) add there continue to be few opportunities for training in museum and gallery education.

Grenier (2009), however, argues that better supporting and expanding visitors’ learning has been the impetus behind the growth and diversity of activities found in art galleries and museums today. Indeed, these institutions are reaching out to diverse audiences, creating new programmes and transforming their educational practice towards learning with an emphasis on developing the adults’ self-direction (Clover, Sanford & Jayme, 2010). Hooper-Greenhill (2007) applauds this movement away from earlier controlling, aesthetic pedagogical practices. Roberts (1997, p.8) concurs: ‘education has become too restrictive and misleading for the museum setting....There has been a conscious shift toward “learning” (emphasising the learner), “experience” (emphasising the open-endedness of the outcome) and “meaning-making” (emphasising the act of interpretation).’

Yet other scholars caution what they see as the neoliberal creep behind the concept of learning (English & Mayo, 2012; Martin, 2003). Lahav (2003) challenges ‘personalised’ interpretations of the arts. She believes that releasing the ‘shackles of elitism associated with the traditional one line story of art [and creating] new more people-centred, transparent and pluralistic understandings’ has led to a fragmented learning experience. In her view, learning in museums has become like a trip to the supermarket – ‘we are invited to choose which story or

theme we fancy [which often] leaves people feeling increasingly insecure and undirected' (Lahav, 2003, page). But Grek (2004, p.85) theorises an education that includes a 'sensitivity to accessibility and interpretation and a staunch critique of elitism and tradition which provide adults with 'the aptitudes ... for the symbolic re-appropriation of their resources.' Given the range of views in the literature, our research aimed to explore the adult education perspectives and practices of contemporary museum and gallery educators.

### **Methodology and methods**

This study explored the education perspectives and practices of adult educators in arts and cultural institutions in Canada, Scotland and England (Britain). Canada and Britain have a history of welfare practice with relatively robust social policies and publicly funded institutions. Both are racially and ethnically diverse, with large numbers of immigrant populations. Both currently have conservative governments aggressively implementing deep, ideologically driven changes which in many ways are accelerating social, economic, environmental and cultural problems and inequities.

The primary question that guided the study concerned how adult educators (and community outreach or development workers) understood and enacted their educational work. We were also interested in which social issues were being addressed, the nature and composition of target audiences, the educational backgrounds of the educators, the relationship between internal and external activities, and the nature of institutional support for adult education programming. The study employed a cross-national, comparative approach to allow the researcher to gather and analyse in-depth data, apply theory and draw comparisons of similarity and difference between the countries studied (Hantrais, 2009; Harris, 2007).

The criteria used to identify the 21 institutions were that they were public, medium or large-scale, urban, servicing diverse audiences, and had an adult education/learning mandate or programme. Twenty one interviews were conducted in Britain and twelve in Canada which has far fewer public museums and art galleries. Of these, although not by design, thirty-one were female and only one was male. Gender composition of the educators was identified as an issue, but is beyond the scope of this short paper. Participants' work experience ranged from one to 25 years. While most were located in 'learning' departments, others were drawn from community outreach/programming units.

Three data collection strategies were used. The first was individual interviews with participants in which understandings and practices of adult education were discussed. Focus groups were used when the adult educators chose to be interviewed in pairs or as a group. The third strategy was to observe workshops, seminars, organised talks, training programmes and special educational events (e.g. Human Library Project). All interviews and focus groups were audiotaped, fully transcribed and returned to interviewees for input and revision. Field notes were taken, along with photographic records of educational activities. The data from these sources were categorised in relation to the research questions. All names in this paper are pseudonyms and no institutions are identified although if it is relevant we identify the country.

### **Findings**

*[We are] not just putting lipstick on the elephant.* (Mira, UK)

In this paper we will discuss the tensions between the terms 'education and learning', the place and role of education in the institution and beyond, the educational backgrounds and training of the museum and gallery educators, and examples of socially responsive practice. Before moving to these areas, we discuss some similarities and differences between the two countries and help explain some of the findings.

### **Learning and the laissez faire**

The field of adult education is alive with debate around the meanings and purposes of 'education' and 'learning' (e.g. English & Mayo, 2012; Kilgore, 1999) so it is not surprising to also find this tension in public arts and cultural institutions. In both Canada and the UK educators spoke of a major shift in the gallery and museum sector from 'education' to 'learning'. The websites of these institutions also reflect this shift. Learning is by far the most common label used for adult programming (Canada) or community outreach work (Britain) (Clover, Sanford & Jayme, 2010). This shift in terminology coincides in the UK with government strategies for creating cohesive, active and sustainable communities. By extension these strategies manifest in cultural policy to re-shape the work of art galleries and museums (Crooke, 2007). What is interesting is that no Canadian participants could link this shift in their institutions to any specific government policy. We however, attribute it to the global march of the life-long learning discourse and its impact on all areas of adult education (English & Mayo, 2012).

Adult educators have adopted this shift in terminology as Janice in the UK illustrates: 'We agree with this change because education is more formal and top-down whereas if we are looking at learning it is self-motivated, self-driven, and there is no kind of *particular standard* (emphasis hers).' In Canada, Andrea expressed it like this: 'education is something that happens to people, learning is something that happens inside you.' While at first glance this discourse may look empowering, we need to be mindful of conceptualisations that can be a semiotic camouflage for individualism. Nina accepted this shift not so much because it was government mandated, but as a means to challenge normative pedagogical practice that she, like many scholars (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), found both disrespectful and useless:

"when you look at what accounted for education, you saw how it was always somebody [in the gallery] who set the expectations...the process and outcomes. No one [the visitors/learners] spoke or asked questions. They went away numbed by someone else's interpretation, numbed by information, lulled in to complacency and acceptance."

One of the participants expressed an understanding of 'learning' that was troubling, as this conversation with the interviewer after a training session illustrates:

**Interviewer:** I would like to follow-up on something you said in your talk earlier about government mandates and learning.

**Kayla:** In this Gallery we challenge the social cohesion, integration and empowerment discourse of the government, as well as the notion of 'learning outcomes'.

**I:** So what does that look like in practice?

**K:** As you can see, the façade of this building is not welcoming. We used to be a more ad-hoc group of artists but now we are more professional. We are a public but working gallery so we do not want people just dropping in. Our workshops have no aims, no goals, no purposes. I just like to bring a group together with no intentions at all and just watch what they do. I asked to have my title changed from Education and Outreach Coordinator because I don't 'educate' anyone. So I'm now the Participation Coordinator as I encourage participation, not education.

I: So what does participation look like?

K: Well, people just creating.

I: Just creating. Was that clear?

K: In the first set of workshops, people did ask what we were doing and why - what this was all about. But I think not just feeding them answers is important and they should just figure it out. Everyone is so outcomes and purpose-oriented.

I: How well did that work?

K: Well, quite a few did not come back for the second session and finally, there was only one artist left. So I organised a celebration of the programme and I put up posters all around the community but no one actually showed up.

I: Do you think that is because they do not feel welcome and perhaps questioned the purpose?

K: But I think process is all that matters. It is important to just have creative spaces where people can learn without any intentions – ‘thinking through making art’ is what I call it.

I: Do you think the community understands this?

K: No, I mean yes, I mean I guess they just don’t understand what I am doing. The focus is on ‘process’ so there is no ‘point’. We challenge government discourse. Do you think I need to think about this more?

While Kayla sees herself as combating the neoliberal education impositions of ‘learning outcomes’, something critical educators applaud (e.g. Martin, 2003), this laissez faire arts ‘facilitation’ approach does not engage people in any kind of constructive, collective interrogation of problematic state mandates, nor does it encourage dialogue and action around issues affecting people’s lives in the low income neighbourhood where the museum is situated. Even more disconcerting is the fact that this woman was a guest speaker at a training institute

and situated as an ‘authority’.

#### *Internal and external tensions*

We also uncovered an interesting dimension to the terminology in conversations around the internal and external work of the institution. To illustrate, we begin with this comment by Wilma: ‘inside the institution we host *education* (our emphasis) events and these are lectures and seminars and courses. Community learning and programming is done outside.’ What she is implying, and others concurred, is that while they do ‘education’, it is ‘formal, organised, content driven and takes place inside this institution’. She explains that they found in many cases, ‘a chasm between the ‘educators’ and the ‘community programmers’. This chasm was recognised by informants in the U.K. and in Canada, but different explanations were presented. One explanation was the lack of collegiality between departments, As Teresa in the U.K. explains: ‘we have no staff canteen [space to come together] so it separates people [in different departments]. We don’t have the ideal space for informal chatter and a way to really understand people’s ways of working. We are all a series of separate units separated by area.’ In many cases the education or learning department was in one area of the building, and community outreach in another. In Canada education specialists in the larger institutions also noted a physical and ideological division between education and community programming. The reason most cited was because of the monopoly ‘school’ had on the term education. Dana captures it quite well in this comment: ‘in this institution, the education department runs the school visits so our work is not seen as education.’ Further, many participants in both Canada and the UK defaulted to talk about their school-focussed activities during the interviews even though we made it very clear our focus was on adult education.

#### **Educational backgrounds and training**

The majority of participants lacked any type of training, certificate or degree in adult education, which may also account for some of the confusion around terminology and the internal-external split. If you have never seen community outreach/development through the lens of adult education and learning, you would be unlikely to be able to define it as such. Educational backgrounds were primarily as art historians or archaeologists, although Sarah felt she was hired ‘because I have a background in working with community, using theatre and film.’ Not surprisingly, many had educational backgrounds as teachers. Meena argued this could be a challenge in terms of promoting and organising new forms of adult learning:

My concern is that a lot of museums actually tend to employ teachers or ex-teachers, and I think that can narrow down the opportunities for the organisation, because they will only work with what they know. If you bring in a primary teacher, essentially they'll know the school curriculum, they'll know that age group, they'll know the links with the schools. They don't have the broad experience of other things [different groups of adults and learning]. If you've been in schools for years and make a shift to museums, you are still institutionalised and you are used to prescriptive working methods. Sometimes I think that is not the best way because if you've got a more creative framing you can think outside the box. I'm not saying teachers can't, but my concern is that they forget that there are other people with a lot to offer.

When we asked how the adult educators had learned to do their job, the majority spoke of preferring to work with the public, rather than collections and being willing to take chances and risks. Others did, however, have adult education certificates and even strongly politically oriented training: 'I did nonformal training at the [popular education] centre when I was at the [gallery]...we all share an interest and background in popular education.' It is to this risk and social responsiveness we now turn.

### **The aesthetic of social purpose**

'There are a lot of educational programmes out there. The arts is what differentiates us, it is our strength.' Although spoken by Carla, this was a sentiment that wove its way through all the conversations, whether the emphasis was on education, learning or community outreach. However, nowhere were the arts more intensely and critically employed than in the 'education' of community within a vision of social change and transformation. As our study progressed we began to encounter a very different dimension to the work: a determination to make change, both within and outside the institutions.

Dana describes their work in Canada like this: 'This work is about a 'social issue' – educating and reaching out to the general public – and not just a community outreach project [although that is the department]. In other words, the purpose is different in the way you describe it – as education and not engagement although I hope it will be 'engaging'. Dana and others described their work explicitly as educational, arguing that intentionality was missing in the 'laissez faire discourse of learning' (Geena). That intentionality was towards social justice and social change. For example, Ingrid's work focuses on 'getting people from the [social housing] estates to open their eyes to what they have and put

forward their own opinions and views.' This work is in fact 'a political act, a threat to the existing...relations' (English & Mayo, 2010, p.52). Laurie talks about grassroots control and the value of creating partnership spaces:

the sex worker rights organisation [runs from] this base [the popular education department]. In that room they...run language classes for and by migrant sex workers, and... campaigns... specifically around the self-representation of sex workers. Our campaign on the Olympics was around the right of sex workers to define the discourse of trafficking because the government uses that discourse to close down sites of sex workers....That partnership involves artists because I am an artist...but it's very much led by the community and they develop posters and reports.

Across the three countries and in almost all the institutions – and this was most often even aside from the contradictions around the terms education and learning - were a plethora of collective, critical adult education activities, ranging from workshops to train women to become activists or learn to develop their own videos to tell community stories, to tackling religious intolerance. This work was not easy:

I have had moments [during the workshops] where...I felt like I [was] in over my head, it has been quite intense. I don't know really what's happening here. I'm sitting in the fire [of debate], but it's not my argument – the ashes are not mine....I've learned a lot about [how to handle] religious people [laughs]....But you've got to step in to the fire (Hilda)

Like Hilda, others described their approach as risk-taking, and often based on trial and error. Perhaps due to the new ground they were covering, they sometimes expressed concern about their own abilities and skill levels. And yet we saw numerous creative projects with marginalised groups such as asylum seekers, people with disabilities, and women prisoners. Some, however, were concerned with the number and variety of activities, concerned by what they termed 'mission drift', trying to be something for everyone. For others, the concern focused on sustainability, trust and long-term commitment:

We work with a lot of communities but it is more important to stick with one and not say, well, now I can check off that box with such and such a community....It is important people...feel that no matter what background they

come from, they are working with the staff members in this museum who care that they actually tell the stories, because their stories are rich and vast.

This has less to do with fluctuations in institutional mandates than with government policy.

We also took part in workshops in the UK where notions of power were deconstructed using the artworks. We sat in lectures with audiences composed of the most privileged members of society and watched how the educators used the ‘masters’ paintings to highlight racism and the creation of an ‘other’. We heard how the arts could comfortably bring artists and ‘migrant rights folks together to think about how [they] could perform [to] activate political spaces in a different way.’ In this case art was used to bond the group together and to facilitate constructive social relationships; in each case, the ‘*objet d’art* is at centre of the experience’ and functioned to ‘bring the poetic and political together to disrupt’ (Wilma).

### **Institutional support**

We conclude with a look at institutional support in terms of adult education. While some institutions were extremely supportive, ‘Our whole mission is to do with education’ (Carla), the majority of interviewees talked about a disconnection between the mission and the actual support they received, making reference what Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011) call the ‘uneasy’ relationship. One example of this was exclusion from new exhibitions: ‘we are still not invited in when the curators are designing a new exhibition. We are not asked how this could be done for the best learning opportunities, we are just to get on with it once the exhibition is mounted.’ (Laua). Perhaps the most creative exemplar of the ‘low’ status of adult education in the institution was this metaphoric comparison: ‘Well you can look at it like this. The Chief of the gallery is the Prime Minister, the administrators are the cabinet and the curators are the House of Lords. And education, well, we are the House of Commons!’

Although Mastai (2007, p.174) believes the conflict between ‘curators and the new cadre of museum educators who claimed the visitor’s view as their own point of view’, has given way in various institutions, the power struggle was still very much in place in others. In one case an attempt to have community artefacts and works put on display was met with suspicion by curators because, ‘is (was) seen as taking away their power and they are no longer the experts they are used to being’ (Maria).

Hilda had quite a different take on the relationship between curators and educators, calling for reciprocity:

Right now, we are all just educators because our subject specialist left and they never filled the position. The positives are that we've got more people and groups coming to us than we can possibly cope with just ... The downside is that we work with what we know, but we can't really get any further into the objects without a subject curator....My knowledge is how to work with communities, how to work with educational institutions... I am an educator not a content specialist. Yet as noted earlier, every single educator had a background in a traditional subject which should enable them to work with the collections and stand them in better stead with curators. Such are the vagaries of institutions.

### **Discussion**

On one hand, what is clear from these and other statements about 'learning' is what English and Mayo (2012) and Martin (2003) describe as individualistic notions of learning – self-directed learning that assumes a freedom to choose, a freedom to act, a freedom to have one's own interpretations and understandings. Problematically, this lens comes from government policies and adult educators are concerned that it allows governments and by extension institutions to abdicate responsibility to provide quality, collective, critical education. In addition, while Kayla's anarchist challenge to lifelong learning's learning outcomes is admirable, it equates all intentionality with 'control' and inadvertently suggests a neutrality in facilitation that, as Freire argued, does not exist. Kilgore (1999), along with other educators in this study, argues the need for a values-based emphasis, an education aimed specifically at raising critical consciousness, providing opportunities for dialogue, debate and action for a "vision of social justice" (p. 200). It is alarming when an authority on art gallery education can present a view of education entirely void of social responsibility and not be questioned by any of the students in the programme. What does this say about how gallery and museum educators are being trained? There is a gap in the literature on the content and practice of formal and non-formal training programmes that needs to be filled. Having said this, the learning discourse in these institutions poses a challenge to traditional deeply engrained, didactic, and expert driven practices that continue in these institutions.

The tension between the educators and the curators, although much less active in some institutions, is very much based on content expert versus process/com-

munity voice expert. Curators are the long-standing voice of authority in the museum hierarchy (Janes, 2009). In her comments about requiring a balance or curators and educators, Hilda reflects the need for what Freire and Horton (1990) called knowledge authority on the part of both content and education specialists. These institutions are made up of both content/collections and education/engagement, and our findings suggest that an imbalance of emphasis either way can create problems for renewal and change.

Despite confusion around terminology, all of the institutions are responding in some way to the diverse needs and interests of the communities they serve. The myriad critical and provocative, even courageous, educational activities illuminate a willingness to take the creative risks necessary to make a difference in communities. Janes (2009, p.17) reminds us that something worth doing ‘is worth doing poorly until you do it well.’ But while these educators are committed and socially responsive, unless the institutions incorporate the need for this work into their mission, the activities will end when the individual(s) retires or is made redundant under budget cuts. Further, although we only mentioned this, the vast majority of educators in arts and cultural institutions are women, which raises the problematic issue of ‘feminisation of work and its accompanying low status (Cooke-Reynolds & Zucweck, 2004). Whether or how training programmes provide much by way of interrogating gender is something that requires further investigation.

Observations of the educational work inside museums and galleries indicate audiences are predominantly middle and upper class. This means that in spite of many efforts to be more open and accessible, diverse representation in museum visits and program participation has not been achieved. However, this can also be seen as an asset. Sitting in a lecture theatre, watching speakers use the masters’ artworks to tell a group of 80-100 very privileged individuals that racism was socially and artistically constructed, and how people like them perpetuate the problem, opened our eyes to an educational potential. Far from simply remaining ‘remote from the... disorder of daily life’ (Janes, 2009, p.3), these educators are using their elite status to educate a population often beyond often reaching, challenging stereotypes, and tackling some of society’s most pressing issues. They are digging where they stand, and beyond.

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